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Kassebaum finds plenty to smile about in Iraq

By John Connor
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TALLIL AIR BASE, Iraq – John Kassebaum, counsel for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Gulf Region South district, found that sunrise in the desert is a great time of day. "Everything is quiet and peaceful until the sun gets up in the sky and the heat and wind turn the place into a blast furnace," he said.

Kassebaum is winding up an eight-month tour in Iraq and will return shortly to his job with USACE's Charleston, South Carolina district where he worked for 10 years. A graduate of the University of South Carolina School of Law, Kassebaum said, "Iraqi business practices are different but I think both the contractors and the GoI (Government of Iraq) view us as fair and equitable in our administration of construction contracts; sort of like the honest broker, which is why Iraq has provided new funding for the U.S. to use for projects that benefit the Iraqi people."

GRS is headquartered at Tallil Air Base near the city of Nasiriyah. The district oversees construction projects in Iraq's nine southern provinces, helping communities with new schools, hospitals, court-houses, water treatment plants, roads and bridges. Kassebaum's job is to provide legal advice and assistance to the GRS commander and staff or as he put it, "basically, my job here was to help with construction contract formation, award and administration."

"Probably the highlight was working to award the Port of Umm Qasr pier and sea-



John Kassebaum, with the Gulf Region Division South district, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, office of counsel. [USACE Photo]

wall project," said Kassebaum. "This \$53 million project was USACE's first Foreign Military Sales project in Iraq, which means it's funded by the Government of Iraq."

Kassebaum recalls walking to work one morning and seeing a small fox strolling across the compound, an experience that brought to mind the "Desert Fox" of World War II fame. "I saw the fox a few more times, but I think he's moved on," he said. Other memorable sidelights include sharing fresh yogurt and dates with Iraqis while learning various local customs from them.

Kassebaum will return home to his two children, a daughter of 14 and a son who turned 12 while he was in Iraq. "I miss them very much and am very excited about being back with them again." He grew up in Kansas and moved to Charleston 28 years ago. "We all love being on the water, fishing, and just going to an uninhabited island beach for the day in our boat." He also has family in Council Grove, Kan., Huntsville, Tenn., and Fairfield, Conn.

Reflecting on his tour, Kassebaum said, "I love to travel and am a student of history and archeology, so being next door to the ancient city of Ur, the Ziggurat and the house of Abraham has been a real treat."

These are pieces in the mosaic of a tour Kassebaum described as "a great experience both personally and professionally."

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